DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 482 205 SO 034 412

AUTHOR	Perry, Laura B.
TITLE	Democratic Aspects of Post-Communist Schooling.
PUB DATE	2002-03-00
NOTE	13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Comparative and International Education Society Conference (46th, Orlando, FL, March 6-9, 2002).
PUB TYPE	Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Comparative Education; *Democracy; *Educational Policy; *Educational Practices; Elementary Secondary Education; Foreign Countries
IDENTIFIERS	Europe (Central); Europe (East)

ABSTRACT

The fall of communism in 1989 brought a renewed interest in the educational systems of central and eastern Europe. Many foreign scholars claim that post-communist schooling is undemocratic, or at best transitionally democratic. For schools to democratize, they argue, teachers must become less authoritative; teaching methods should focus more on critical thinking skills, rather than memorization; schools should become warmer, more informal, and student-centered; and authorities should develop new civics textbooks and curricula. The belief that schooling in the post-communist region is less democratic than in the western school systems is based on two assumptions: (1) school atmosphere and relations, teaching methods, and curriculum are indeed anti-democratic in the post-communist countries; and (2) education's role in fostering democratization is limited to these in-school, micro-level mechanisms. The paper addresses these two assumptions and considers democratic aspects of post-communist schooling, such as the way schools are funded. It concludes that, rather than western educators feeling superior when they study education in post-communist countries, they should realize these post-communist countries can offer insights into some of the most pressing problems in education at the beginning of the 21st century. (Contains 16 references.) (BT)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

DEMOCRATIC ASPECTS OF POST-COMMUNIST SCHOOLING

LAURA B. PERRY

Loyola University Chicago
1041 W. Ridge Rd.
Wilmette, IL 60041
lperry1@luc.edu
(773) 782-1240

presented at the annual
2002 CIES conference
Orlando, FL, March 6-9

ED 482 205

SO 034 412

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

L. B. Perry

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Introduction

The relationship between democracy and education is highly complex and elusive. Scholars have been trying to understand how education can foster democratization for decades, and yet there are still no clear models or formulas. Complicating the relationship is the fact that democracy is a concept that is hard to define and that has multiple meanings, and education is a large and complex social institution. Therefore, when we say 'democratic education' or 'education for democracy,' we can be talking about a variety of things. Often this includes curriculum (e.g., civics education, human rights education), school practices (e.g., student councils), teaching methods (e.g., inquiry vs. lecture), classroom atmosphere, and student-teacher relations (e.g., informal and non-hierarchical) that are believed to promote democratic behavior and values. Indeed, current conceptions about education and democracy frequently focus on such micro-level, in-school mechanisms – teaching methods, school atmosphere, political socialization, and social relations.

The fall of communism in 1989 brought a renewed interest in the educational systems of central and eastern Europe. Despite the region's high levels of student achievement (with limited expenditures and resources), most foreign scholars have focused their attention on reform efforts, describing and evaluating what has changed and what still needs to change in order for post-communist education to become modern and progressive, to catch-up with the 'West.' Rather than seeing schooling in the region as worthy of study for what they are doing right, most foreign scholars seek to impose their version of what schools should look like. It is a one-way relationship, with the 'West' as teacher and expert and the 'East' as student.

Many foreign scholars claim that post-communist schooling is undemocratic, or at best 'transitionally' democratic. In order for schools, and even society, to democratize, they argue teachers must become less authoritative, teaching methods should focus more on critical thinking skills rather than memorization, schools should become more warm, informal, and student-centered,

and authorities should develop new civics textbooks and curricula. For example, Safr and Woodhouse argue that Czech teachers use methods unsuitable to democracy:

> ...the increase in autonomy for teachers has not resulted in greater freedom in inquiry for students... This gap between the ideals of educational freedom and the lack of free inquiry in schools constitutes on ongoing tension... There is now an almost total lack of guidance on the part of the government on how teachers should use their newfound freedom in the classroom. How, for example, should teachers enhance the capacity of their students to think critically and independently, whether in mathematics, physics, music, or any other discipline?... Without guidance, Czech teachers lack the necessary experience to exert their authority in the classroom in ways that are consistent with student autonomy and freedom of expression. As a result, they tend to resort to the well-tried aims and methods of the past. These, however, are not always appropriate for education in a democratic society (Safr & Woodhouse, 1999:78-9).

The belief that schooling in the post-communist region is less democratic than in the 'West' is based on two assumptions. The first is that school atmosphere and relations, teaching methods, and curriculum are indeed anti-democratic in the post-communist countries. The second is that education's role in fostering democratization is limited to these in-school, micro-level mechanisms. In the following sections I will address these two assumptions.

Critique of the notion that post-communist schooling is undemocratic

While it is true that the teacher holds more authority in post-communist schools than in North America and many western European schools, it is problematic to assume that post-communist school climate does not promote democratization, or even that it promotes authoritarianism. First, the very assumption that post-communist schools are authoritarian is debatable. 'Authoritarian' is a loaded word that carries strong connotations. It could be argued instead that relationships between students and teachers are formal or respectful rather than

'authoritarian.' Moreover, some authors have noted that student-teacher relations are often warm and close, sometimes even more so than in the U.S. (Andrews, 1997).

The second problem about assuming that post-communist student-teacher relations and school atmosphere are undemocratic is that they are similar to both relationships historically in American and other schools, and contemporary schools in other parts of Europe. In the past, school atmosphere in American schools was also more formal, yet most people do not believe the U.S. was less democratic historically. In fact, many social researchers such as Robert Bellah et al. (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1996) and Robert Putnam (Putnam, 1995) make the opposite claim, i.e. that American behavior is becoming less democratic. Similarly, the current school climate in many western European countries is similar to that in the post-communist region. Yet no one argues that these countries or their schools are undemocratic.

Many scholars believe teaching methods should focus less on raw facts and more on application and higher-order thinking skills. This assertion is not problematic in itself, although it becomes so when people assume that students in the post-communist countries do not possess the ability to be critical or analytical. This assumption becomes even more problematic when it is further assumed that post-communist education is not democratic because of a lack of particular teaching methods, or even that students are not prepared to function in a democratic society. For example, De Simone asserts:

> Although we have had the freedom to develop new methodologies to foster and nurture analytical and critical thinking, as well as metacognitive and interpersonal skills, such has not been the case in Eastern Europe… The development of a new philosophy of education is the most important problem facing the former Eastern bloc countries... Subsequently, any new philosophy of education requires the development of new methodologies of education - those that will help students develop the knowledge, values, and skills required to meet the challenges of a democratic society. (De Simone, 1996: 104-5)

The assumption that students in eastern and central Europe do not have analytical skills is based on two notions: that the only way for students to develop critical thinking skills in schools is through pedagogical methods that foster discussion, analysis and debate; and that schools are the only place young people learn to be critical.

Insight into this question can be found in a study by the International Social Survey Program in 1994 that examined international opinions about childrearing (Vecerník & Mateju, 1999: 334-5). One of the questions of the study was 'What is more important in preparing children for life?' Respondents were given two choices: 'To be obedient' and 'To think for themselves.' Only 8.6 percent of the Czech respondents answered that obedience was more important, and only former East German, Norwegian and Swedish respondents reported similarly low percentages. In Bulgaria, U.K., Poland, Russia, and Spain, 20-30 percent of the respondents answered that being obedient was more important, and in Hungary, Ireland, Italy and the Netherlands 30-50 percent of the respondents thought being obedient was more important. The results of this survey show that the great majority of Czech parents believe in a non-authoritarian style of childrearing. From this we can infer that some parents believe children need to learn how to think independently, but that the family rather than the school is responsible for developing this skill. Moreover, the study shows that there is no clear divide between attitudes in Europe. Parents in western Europe are just as likely to have certain attitudes as those in eastern and central Europe.

Assuming that eastern and central European students do not have analytical and critical thinking skills also neglects the possibility that analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and logical reasoning can be developed through subject areas other than civics and history, and through methods other than discussion and debate. Foreign languages and advanced mathematics and physics, subjects which more students in the post-communist countries are likely to study than their counterparts in the U.S. or western Europe, develop higher-order thinking skills. Likewise, traditional teaching

methods more commonly used in eastern and central Europe than in North America can also develop higher-order thinking skills. For example, Hungarian math instruction uses a whole-class pedagogical approach that is interactive and constructivist. Rather than emphasizing drill and rote learning, such an approach develops logic and problem-solving skills that British scholars find remarkable (Graham, Rowlands, Jennings, & English, 1999); (Andrews, 1997); (Hatch, 1999). Similarly, some Finnish teachers are critical of Russian pedagogy, which they believe is too authoritarian, traditional, teacher-centered, and fact-driven, yet they nonetheless admit that Russian students have higher thinking skills than their Finnish schoolmates. Laihiala-Kankainen quotes a Finnish teacher:

> Although the Finnish teachers have a critical attitude towards some traditional forms of teaching that they suppose to be used by Russian teachers, they admit frankly the high level of learning and thinking in Russian schools: "With them, children are expected to show much higher levels of thinking. All their children's games or books and tasks require thinking and concentration and sort of inferencing more than with us... so their ability to think and consider problems is much better already from the beginning." ((Laihiala-Kankainen, 1998: 71)

Thus, Western scholars should not assume that students in the post-communist countries do not have analytical, problem-solving, and critical thinking skills simply because their schools are different.

The final problem with the assumption that post-communist students do not know how to think critically is that it exaggerates the degree to which critical thinking is taught in U.S. schools. American elementary schools, especially those which serve minority and working-class communities, are more likely to focus on drill, repetition, summary and comprehension than on any of the higher-order thinking skills. Pederson and Cogan's (Pederson & Cogan, 2000) study of three high schools in a large American city found that only a minority of the students (primarily white and middle-class) received civic instruction that promoted analysis and critical thinking. The

majority of the students (primarily minority and poor) received civics lessons that focused on the importance of obeying the law and the authorities.

Democratic Aspects of Post-Communist Schooling

Broadening the conception of democracy and education to include structural, macro-level processes allows one to see that many aspects of post-communist schooling are democratic. Democratic theory includes a number of key concepts, such as equality and choice. Democracies strive to promote equality of opportunity, low levels of societal inequality, and freedom of choice. Educational structures and processes which foster opportunity, equity and choice are thus democratic.

One example of a democratic educational structure is the way schools are funded. Most of the post-communist countries provide their schools with approximately the same per-pupil funding. There is relative equality of provision not only by region, with little difference between urban and rural areas, but also by social class and ethnicity. Working class and middle class students attend the same schools and study the same curriculum. An elementary school or gymnasium in a large city looks similar to one in a provincial town, and schools vary little by neighborhood. This is in contrast to schooling in the U.S., where spending differentials within a state may exceed 300 percent (Kozol, 1991). Moreover, per pupil spending in the U.S. favors middle class and wealthy students. Poor students, the majority of whom come from racial and ethnic minority groups, receive on average less funding per pupil. Thus, there is an equality of educational opportunity in the post-communist region that is completely lacking in the U.S. This aspect of post-communist schooling is democratic because it provides equality of educational provision, regardless of class, race, or ethnicity. Students receive similar basic education, in schools with similar financial resources and

materials, regardless of the area in which they live or their family's socioeconomic background. This equality of education translates to a greater degree of equal opportunity to attain life success.

Another democratic aspect of post-communist education is that it gives parents and students much greater freedom of choice in selecting a school. Students are not required to attend a certain school by the authorities. Rather, parents may choose to send their child to any public school, regardless of where they live. Translated to an American example, it would be as if poor, inner-city minority students had the legal opportunity to attend wealthy public suburban schools.

Another significant, and somewhat radical to an American reader, facet of school choice in the post-communist countries is that private schools, including parochial ones, are heavily subsidized by the national government. In most of the countries, the national government pays the salaries of private school teachers, textbooks and supplies; together this accounts for approximately 80 percent of the typical private school's budget. Thus, tuition at most private and parochial schools is affordable for the typical family. Private and parochial schools may be based on particular instructional philosophies (e.g., Waldorf schools), use minority languages for instruction, or be founded on certain religious beliefs (e.g., Catholic parochial schools, Islamic or Jewish schools, etc.) Subsidized private schooling is democratic for two reasons. First, it does not financially penalize religious and ethnic minorities. Rather than having to pay taxes to support public schools and then in addition pay significant tuition to attend a private or parochial school, such as is common in the U.S. and many other OECD countries, parents in many post-communist countries can choose a school which reflects their religious or philosophical values or cultural heritage without having to pay more than an individual from the dominant culture.

The second reason why subsidized private schooling is democratic is because it tends to be less elitist, and thus less likely to reproduce the status of the upper class. In countries where non-state schools are publicly funded, these schools are much less elitist than in countries like the U.S.

and the U.K., where they are completely privately funded (Piwowarski, 1998). Private schools often cater to the society's elite, especially in the U.S. and U.K.. Because most private schools, especially those that offer a rigorous course of study, are expensive, they contribute to a reproduction of social inequality. It may be, then, that private schooling is more egalitarian in the post-communist countries than in the U.S. and many European countries.

Finally, many of the post-communist countries have a tripartite system of secondary education comprised of academic (e.g., gymnasium or lycee), technical, and vocational schools. While it is certainly true that gymnasia and lycee are elitist in the sense that they provide education to a selected few, they are certainly no different than the selective, private college preparatory schools of the U.S., the U.K., and many other OECD countries. One could even argue that gymnasia are paradoxically more democratic because they offer bright students a challenging course of study that in the U.S. only wealthy and urban students have the possibility to enjoy. In many of the post-communist countries, however, all districts have gymnasia and thus all bright and academically motivated students have the opportunity to study at a gymnasium, regardless of where they live and the financial resources of their family.

Conclusion

Through the way they fund their schools, the educational systems in most of the post-communist countries are highly democratic because they provide equal opportunity to students from all social strata, minimize the upper class' ability to reproduce their status, and allow ethnic and religious minorities to attend schools that match their beliefs, values and heritage. Moreover, the educational systems in most of the post-communist countries provide a level of choice that is unparalleled in the U.S. and many other OECD countries, both in terms of the type of schooling from which students may choose, and in the fact that there is little financial obstacle to choosing

any school. The result is that students from less privileged socioeconomic backgrounds and from minority cultures (whether racial, ethnic, philosophical, or religious) have more opportunity and choice than in the U.S. or other countries.

Based on a micro-level point of view, some scholars could argue that schools in the U.S. and some other OECD countries are more democratic than in the post-communist countries. This argument is problematic, however, for it makes assumptions that are based on cultural bias and on notions that may make common sense but have little empirical backing. For example, judgements about appropriate teaching methods and school social relations are more likely to be based on ethnocentric ideas about best schooling practices than on research. Moreover, very little research has proven that in-school practices make that much of a difference in terms of a country's overall level of democratization or an individual's behavior and values. Torney-Purta and Schwille's (Torney-Purta & Schwille, 1986) classic study did find that in-school variables affect individual behavior and values, but that they only explain 10 percent of an individual student's civic attitudes. As the authors note, ten percent is a significant amount for survey research on a complex topic, yet it nevertheless shows that 90 percent of an individual's civic attitudes, values and behavior is explained by other factors.

Almond and Verba's (Almond & Verba, 1989) classic study of civic values found that qualitative, in-school differences explained very little of the individual variation in civic values and behavior. What was important, however, was the quantitative aspects of education (i.e., individual educational attainment). Individuals with more years of schooling had higher levels of civic engagement than those with less educational attainment. Moreover, individuals with certain levels of education had similar civic values and attitudes to their peers in other countries, despite differences in their respective national systems of education.

Even more importantly, equitable schooling satisfies a democratic society's need for social justice. Scholars from a wide variety of political orientations, from Jonathan Kozol (Kozol, 1991) to E.D. Hirsch (Hirsch, 1997) to Diane Ravitch (Ravitch, 2000), argue that schools in a democratic society must try to maximize individual mobility through equal opportunity to education and minimize class reproduction and societal inequality. Thus, one must ask, 'What is more important – that "multicultural" textbooks contain pictures of ethnic and racial minorities, or that individuals from these groups have access to high quality education? That school social relations are non-hierarchical, or that ethnic and religious minorities can attend schools that match their values? That teachers use small group instructional practices, or that families have the right and opportunity to choose a school regardless of where they live or the thickness of their checkbook?' Schools in the post-communist countries are doing some interesting things. Rather than feeling superior when we study education in the post-communist countries, it is time to realize they can offer insight on to some of the most pressing problems in education at the turn of the 21st century.

Reference List

Almond, G. A., & Verba, S. (1989). The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations. Newbury Park, California: Sage Publications.

Andrews, P. (1997). 'A Hungarian Perspective on Mathematics Education'. Mathematics Teaching, December: 14-17.

Bellah, R. N., Madsen, R., Sullivan, W. M., Swidler, A., & Tipton, S. M. (1996). Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

De Simone, D. M. (1996). 'Educational Challenges Facing Eastern Europe'. Social Education, 60, 2: 104-106.

Graham, T., Rowlands, S., Jennings, S., & English, J. (1999). 'Towards Whole-class Interactive Teaching'. Teaching Mathematics and its Applications, 18, 2: 50-60.

Hatch, G. (1999). 'It Wouldn't Be Like That Here!' Mathematics Teaching, 168, September: 26-31.

Hirsch, E. D. (1997). The Schools We Need. New York: Anchor.

Kozol, J. (1991). Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools. New York: Harper Collins.

Laihiala-Kankainen, S. (1998). 'Russian Pupils in Finnish Schools - Problems Created by Differences in Pedagogical Cultures'. The School Field, 9, 3: 61-76.

Pederson, P. V., & Cogan, J. J. (2000). A Case Study of the Development of Civic Knowledge and Values. Paper presented at the Comparative and International Education Society, San Antonio, TX.

Piwowarski, R. (1998). 'The Educational System in Poland and other Central-Eastern European Countries during the Transition Period'. International Journal of Early Years Education, 6, 2: 165-176.

Putnam, R. (1995). 'Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital'. Journal of Democracy, 6, January: 65-78.

Ravitch, D. (2000). Left Back: A Century of Battles over School Reform. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Safr, V., & Woodhouse, H. (1999). 'Eastern, Western, or Pan-European? Recent Educational Change in the Czech Republic'. European Education, 31, 2: 72-94.

Torney-Purta, J., & Schwille, J. (1986). 'Civic Values Learned in School: Policy and Practice in Industrialized Nations'. Comparative Education Review, 30, February: 30-49.

Vecerník, J., & Mateju, P. (Eds.). (1999). Ten Years of Rebuilding Capitalism: Czech Society after 1989. Prague: Academia.

U.S. Department of Education

Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI)

National Library of Education (NLE)

Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC)

ERIC REPRODUCTION RELEASE

I. Document Identification:

Title:
Democratic Aspects of Post-Communist Education

Author:
Laura B. Perry

Corporate Source:
N/A

Publication Date:
2002

II. Reproduction Release:

In order to disseminate as widely as possible timely and significant materials of interest to the educational community, documents announced in the monthly abstract journal of the ERIC system, Resources in Education (RIE), are usually made available to users in microfiche, reproduced paper copy, and electronic media, and sold through the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). Credit is given to the source of each document, and, if reproduction release is granted, one of the following notices is affixed to the document.

If permission is granted to reproduce and disseminate the identified document, please check one of the following three options and sign the

release form.

X Level 1 - Permitting reproduction and dissemination in microfiche or other ERIC archival media (e.g. electronic) and paper copy.

____ Level 2A - Permitting reproduction and dissemination in microfiche and in electronic media for ERIC archival collection subscribers only.

____ Level 2B - Permitting reproduction and dissemination in microfiche only.

Documents will be processed as indicated provided reproduction quality permits. If permission to reproduce is granted, but no option is marked, documents will be processed at Level 1.

Sign Here: "I hereby grant to the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) nonexclusive permission to reproduce and disseminate this document as indicated above. Reproduction from the ERIC microfiche or electronic media by persons other than ERIC employees and its system contractors requires permission from the copyright holder. Exception is made for non-profit reproduction by libraries and other service agencies to satisfy information needs of educators in response to discrete inquiries."

Signature:

Position: Doctoral Candidate

Printed Name: Laura Perry

Organization: Loyola University Chicago

Address: (home) Ondřičkova 15 130 00 Praha 3 CZECH REPUBLIC

Telephone No: N/A

Date: 11/5/02

III. Document Availability Information (from Non-ERIC Source):

If permission to reproduce is not granted to ERIC, or, if you wish ERIC to cite the availability of the document from another source, please provide the following information regarding the availability of the document. (ERIC will not announce a document unless it is publicly available, and a dependable source can be specified. Contributors should also be aware that ERIC selection criteria are significantly more stringent for documents that cannot be made available through EDRS.)

Publisher/Distributor:

Address:

Price per copy: Quantity price:

IV. Referral of ERIC to Copyright/Reproduction Rights Holder:

If the right to grant this reproduction release is held by someone other than the addressee, please complete the following:

Name:

Address:

V. Attach this form to the document being submitted and send both to:

~~Velma~~ Mitchell, Acquisitions Coordinator